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ABSTRACT

This report describes the completed second stage of an investigation and analysis of the state of educational leadership, policy, and organization in northern Canadian schools. It presents and discusses the different perspectives held by constituents with respect to the goals and purposes of schooling, and the curriculum and language of instruction found in the schools. Two schools in northern Alberta, Moose River and Church Point, were selected for study; administrators, teachers, students, and community members were interviewed. Interview results show a lack of congruence between expectations of the local community and educators at the schools that are culturally based. One example involves school governance issues where the locus of power is determined by government regulations outside the community; this power structure does not address local community issues and needs, such as supporting local Aboriginal languages. There is a tendency to support the status quo and to provide what the educational system in the southern part of Canada describes as a suitable educational experience. Unfortunately, this orientation is Anglo-centric. Principals must attend not only to the voices of the professional and educational elite but also to the voices of those who are generally marginalized, dispossessed, and ignored by this system. (Contains 64 references.) (RT)

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Educational leadership in northern Canada: Where cultures collide

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Educational leadership in northern Canada: Where cultures collide

In this paper we report on the completed second stage of an investigation and analysis of the current state of educational leadership, policy, and organization in northern Canadian schools. The larger, on-going study is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and explores student, educator, parent, and community member perceptions and expectations of educational leadership in northern schools in three western Canadian provinces. Specifically, the objectives of this paper are to report the extent to which stakeholders in two northern Albertan schools perceive the select schools adapt to their specific cultural contexts. Here we present and discuss the different perspectives held by constituents with respect to (1) the goals and purposes of schooling and, (2) the curriculum and language of instruction found in the schools.

The study reported here was conducted in two ethnoculturally diverse communities in Alberta, Canada. The communities are located in what is considered to be Northern Canada, defined as the area coterminous with the boreal forest region south of the arctic (Bone, 1992). The governance and delivery of K-12 education in communities such as those described here involves issues of school organization, leadership, teaching, and culture that are substantively different from those encountered in the rest of Canada.

Context

Within the education research literature, a recognition is developing of the role played by culture in the formulation and exercise of educational leadership (e.g., Hallinger & Leithwood, 1996; Heck, 1996, 1997). We accept the observation of Boyle-Baise (1999) that many anthropologists often view with some trepidation, indeed alarm, the definitions of culture presented by educationalists. It is therefore important that we define our meaning of the concept. Following Agar (1996), culture is "the knowledge you construct to show how acts in the context of one world can be understood as coherent from the point of view of another world" (p. 33). As such, we move beyond viewing culture simply as "the normative glue that holds a particular school together" (Sergiovanni, 2000, p. 1). Such particularity appears, to us,

to perpetuate a closed-system schema of schools, whereas we view the membrane between schools and communities as being opaque to the point of translucency. Therefore culture, in the sense used here, refers to more than the idiosyncratic climate of the school and includes the broader societal culture within which the school is located and functions.

In many First Nations' communities[1], Bands have taken control of their own education programs. Teachers and principals are hired by the Chief and Band Council but daily operations of the school are governed by locally elected school committees. In some instances, provincial curricula are revised and assessment practises challenged as educators strive to overcome centuries of colonialism, neglect, and oppression (see, for example, Berger, 1991; Dickason, 1992; Titley, 1986). In other situations such revisions do not occur. Teachers and administrators, the majority of whom do not share the cultural, linguistic or socio-economic backgrounds of their students (e.g., Goddard, 1996; Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1993), are reluctant or unable to question the status quo. They recognize the education system as being similar to the one they experienced and intuitively accept the "rightness" of that education system. Such acceptance of a model developed by and for the dominant cultural group merely serves to exacerbate and perpetuate what Hesch (1999) has described as "settler interests" (p. 371).

In other communities, the First Nations' have elected to enter into the provincial education system[2]. Serving ethnoculturally diverse populations of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples, many provincially operated schools in the north respond in similar ways to problems similar to those experienced by Band controlled schools. Although situated within the provincial education systems, northern schools often experience greater degrees of freedom and greater expectations for community relevance than their southern counterparts. Local school boards serve similar functions to First Nations school committees, and students in these public schools often share the same linguistic, cultural, and

[1] We are conscious of and sensitive to the fact that different groups of aboriginal people use different terms to speak of themselves. In Canada, the terms 'First Nations' and 'Band' enjoy general use, rather than 'American Indians' or 'Tribe'. We have therefore used these terms in this paper.

[2] In Canada, education is generally a provincial responsibility. In some instances, such as the delivery of education to First Nations' people on reserve, the federal government has responsibility.

historical traditions of those in Band schools. The relationships of power, voice, and social interactions, and how they are supported by educational leadership within ethnoculturally diverse northern schools are generally under-represented in the research literature.

A quarter of a century ago a plethora of research reports and papers addressed issues of equity and inequality in northern region schools (e.g., Alberta Department of Education, 1981; Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, 1973). Many of these documents discussed the need for culturally appropriate curriculum materials (e.g., Friesen, 1977; Rampoul, Singh & Didyk, 1984) or for changes in governance (Allison, 1983; Ingram & McIntosh, 1981, 1983; Swift, 1975). A general dissatisfaction with the quality of education in northern schools that arose during this time resulted in changes to the organization of provincial education. The first Band controlled schools were established in First Nations communities (see Goddard, 1997, for a full description of this process) and provincial school jurisdictions appeared to become more aware of, and responsive to, the ethnocultural diversity in their schools. Since then, although discussions related to northern education have continued (e.g., Carnegie, Goddard, & Heidt, 1992; Frideres, 1983; Kirkness, 1992; Little Bear, Boldt, & Long, 1984), there has not been the same sense of focus. Over the past twenty or thirty years educational development in northern Canada has continued with little scrutiny.

Theoretical Framework

The ethnocultural diversity of contemporary Canadian society, particularly in the north, poses some difficulties for researchers. There is a dearth of literature relevant to the situation that exists in northern schools. As Hallinger and Leithwood (1996) observed, "most published theory and empirical research in [educational] administration assumes that leadership is being exercised in a Western cultural context" (p. 100). This situation exists as much in minority culture communities in North America as it does with respect to non-western cultures. Although Bryant (1996), Capper (1990), and Shields (1996) have addressed educational leadership within an American Indian context, and Goddard and Shields (1997) provided a comparative analysis of governance in Cree and Navajo communities, there have been few

examinations of school leadership that have been grounded in Canada's northern region. This lack of research focussing on northern education generally, and the relationship between educational leadership and the local cultural context in particular, identifies a serious gap in the literature.

Hallinger and Leithwood (1996) hypothesized "that societal culture exerts a significant influence on administrators beyond that of the specific organization's culture" (p. 106). In a preliminary model, they suggested that principal beliefs and experiences, principal leadership, in-school processes, and school outcomes were all affected not only by the institutional structure and culture but also by the wider societal structure. As has been argued elsewhere (Goddard, 2001), the efficacy of such a model is limited to situations where the local community context also reflects the culture of the dominant society. In northern schools, the extent to which "societal culture" is reflected in community life is problematic. There is a difference between the cultural realities of the Dene, the Cree, or the Métis, for example, and those of the white Anglo-European majority culture of the south. If "cultural values shape followers' perceptions of leaders" (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1996, p. 107) and "how people approach space, time, information and communication are shaped by the cultural context" (p. 108), then it is important for researchers to understand the culture of the communities served by northern schools. Further, it is important for researchers to explore the ways in which the majority culture backgrounds of most of the teachers and administrators in northern schools are resonant and dissonant with the local cultural context of these schools.

Following Hallinger and Leithwood (1996), the research reported here acknowledges that "there is much conceptual leverage to be gained from employing culture as a variable in a theoretical framework for educational leadership" (p. 114). However, locating the notion of both the minority culture of the local community and the dominant majority culture of the state within an exploration of education in northern schools reveals other issues that are problematic. These issues are discussed later in the paper.

Methodology

Following on from our earlier individual and collaborative work (e.g., Foster & Goddard, 2001), we framed the research within a paradigm grounded in critical pragmatism (Macpherson, 1996, 1997; Maxcy, 1995a, 1995b). This approach employs the methods of critical ethnography (Carspecken, 1996) and recognizes the ideological, socially critical, and value-laden nature of leadership (Bates, 1995; Greenfield, 1978; Greenfield & Ribbins, 1993; Ryan, 1997). Our research, through its approach and analysis, addresses issues of power, voice, ethnocultural diversity, and social interactions. Elsewhere (Goddard & Foster, 2001) we have termed this a critical constructivist approach. Such an approach allows us to explore issues within the grounded reality of the school and to articulate the impact of our own values and experiences on the analysis and interpretations of those data.

Following Stake (1994, 1995), we adopted a collective case study approach that was instrumental in nature and emergent in design (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Merriam, 1988). As Day, Harris and Hadfield (2001) have argued, much of the research on school leadership has tended to rely overwhelmingly on the perspectives of the leaders themselves. This is limiting in that the source of the data under investigation is the same person as she or he whose behaviours provided the data in the first place. We therefore considered it necessary to include a "multiplicity of perspectives" (p. 21). Accordingly, interviews were conducted with a wide variety of constituents within the educational enterprise – school administrators, teachers, students, parents, and community members. All the interview data, irrespective of source, were given equal weighting in the analysis phase of the study.

Communities

The research reported on in this paper focused on two select schools within northern Alberta, Canada. One community, Moose River[3], is located at the southern edge of the boreal zone and has full-season road access. The second community, Church Point, is in a more isolated location. During the summer

[3] The names of communities and individuals are all pseudonyms.

months there is some access by boat and for ten weeks during the winter a road is constructed across the frozen lakes and rivers. For most of the year, however, the community is accessible only by air.

Data collection

Data were collected through in-depth individual and focus group interviews, direct observation, and field notes, supplemented where appropriate by document analysis. At Church Point we interviewed the two school administrators, six of the eleven teachers, two grade 10 students, and one member of the community. At Moose River we interviewed all five teachers and the principal, six students from various grade levels, a secretary, and two members of the community. Data were collected over a six month period. The research team spent an intensive week in each of the sites. In order to allow for individual differences and the diversity of experiences, the interviews and focus groups sessions were semi-structured and followed an emergent design which allowed the research to be grounded within the contextual realities of each school.

Procedures

All the interviews and focus group sessions were audio tape recorded and transcribed. Individual in-depth interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and returned to each interviewee for "member check" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 313) before being analyzed as data. We received no requests for changes or edits to the transcripts. A constant comparative method of analysis was employed, with the researchers independently reviewing transcripts in an iterative fashion. As categories emerged from the data these were recorded, then subsequently shared and discussed. The primary method of communication throughout this period was via telephone and e-mail.

At a research team meeting held after the weeks of intensive data collection, a research collaborator provided his analysis and interpretation of the transcripts. As he had not visited either of the schools, his perspective provided for researcher triangulation, the "search for additional interpretation more than the confirmation of a single meaning" (Stake, 1995, p. 115). Subsequently, two graduate students analyzed

the data by using the QSR-4 NUD*IST software program. Their observations were also incorporated into the identification and discussion of emergent themes.

From each series of analyses, themes emerged. Through discussion, these themes were clarified and refined, and then subjected to further examination through an iterative review process. Throughout this process we proceeded "not on the basis of comparing each individual person or 'case' with another but on the basis of comparing 'instances' or examples in our data or particular circumstances in which we were interested" (Finch & Mason, 1990, p. 39). The team meetings enabled the researchers to engage in periods of intensive discussion, analysis, and writing.

Trustworthiness

Denzin (1994, p. 508) has suggested that the trustworthiness of qualitative data can be established by examining the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of those data and of the interpretations emanating from them. Such categories replace the notions of reliability and validity contained in more positivistic research reports.

Credibility. The data were collected through a series of interviews. It was assumed that the interviewees were truthful and credible reporters of the information they provided. In ensuring that members from a wide cross-section of the community were interviewed, we endeavoured to collect credible information about the schools and the leadership found therein.

Transferability. Grounded as they are in the contextual realities of the two communities, the interpretations have limited transferability beyond those settings. Nonetheless, the themes that emerged may be considered of some usefulness to those who are concerned with educational leadership, policy, and organization in other northern Canadian schools.

Dependability. The data are considered dependable to the extent that the informants are credible. In considering instances rather than cases (Finch & Mason, 1990), we were able to eliminate some of the researcher prejudice that might occur when considering the information from any particular

individual. Further, the use of an independent third researcher to triangulate the interpretations helps to improve the dependability of the findings reported here.

Confirmability. With any form of case study research the locus of investigation is firmly entrenched in one particular situation. As Goldstein and Blatchford (1998) observed, "social research tends, indeed is forced, into measuring a real population or subpopulation at one point in time within a particular historical setting. By the time the results are available that context will normally have changed" (p. 257). Such a caveat must underlie the study reported here. The north has a tradition of high teacher turnover, and the high levels of transience among community members – including students – was apparent in the interviews. In addition, one of the two principals was openly contemplating retirement and the community was in the process of considering what type of principal ought to be recruited in his stead. To confirm the data by re-interviewing the respondents is therefore likely to be quite difficult. Nonetheless, the "paper trail" of field notes and interview transcripts ought to provide another researcher with the means to confirm our interpretations of the data.

Emergent Themes and Interpretations

The iterative nature of qualitative research ensures that data analysis is continuous and on-going. From the analysis to date, we have identified and constructed several themes. Two of these themes are grounded in the respondents' differing perceptions with respect to the role of educational leadership in determining (1) the goals and purposes of schooling and, (2) the curriculum and language of instruction in the schools.

The goals and purposes of schooling

The role of the school in both communities appears to be contested by the various constituent groups. That there is little congruence between the expectations of the professional educators and those of the community was expressed by nearly all of those with whom we talked. To a certain degree, the educators appeared to view themselves as pedagogical missionaries. They labour on, suffering from various slings and arrows and recognizing that their cause, while possibly just, is nonetheless lost.

There is a sense of despondency, perhaps even despair, in both schools. The one area of agreement between educators and community members was that the schools had poor reputations in their respective communities. One teacher at Church Point, an Aboriginal woman who had been raised in the community and who had returned after some years teaching elsewhere, observed that "we've been getting lots of flack, really harsh, negative things thrown at us teachers here and administrators". In her opinion, the parents found it "easy to condemn and criticize" but rarely came to the school to see what role they could play, or accepted responsibility for their children's perceived lack of success in school.

The idea that the school is the responsibility of the teachers is widespread in Aboriginal communities. To some this is a result of past experiences with a paternalistic government or church authority (e.g., Adams, 19xx; Dickason, 1992; Kirkness, 1992; Rampoul, Singh, & Didyk, 1984; Titley, 1986). At both Moose River and Church Point, people referred to the "residential school experience" as having a negative impact on the community. At Church Point this impact had been exacerbated when, during the transition period from federal to provincial governance,

> kids were taken from the residential school [and] were moved over to the [Church Point] school, but as well some of the nuns who were teachers moved with them. … So even now it changed buildings and organization … for a couple of years it was still perceived as the same thing.

The community resistance to the residential schools was therefore transferred to the new school. The situation was not helped by the architect's decision to base the design of the new school on a model of a Hudson's Bay Company trading post, or fort, complete with palisade. The community quickly tore down the physical wall that separated the school from the village.

The psychological walls, however, remain. The governance structure of both schools is the same. A locally elected school board assists and advises the principal on the day to day operations of the school. One member of each local board then represents the community on the regional school board, which acts as the policy making body for the whole region. This apparent devolution of power to the local level does not significantly affect the operations of the schools, as the actual range of decision-making

power available to the local board is quite limited and the principal retains a significant role. According to one of the principals, "the local board has the autonomy of setting things like the school calendar and anything that's not curriculum related, expenditures and everything, the local board has to approve it. … I don't have to go to my superintendent if I want to buy something."

This may be advantageous in some ways, principally the ability to meet informally and regularly when making such decisions, but the arrangement does have its problems. As the principal continued, "it does break down if you're not getting along with the local board, or their ideas, and they have a personal agenda that isn't fitting with what that of the school would be, then it becomes very difficult." The administrator appeared oblivious to the idea that community members might have reasonable expectations (visions?) for the future of the school, and saw no conflict in privileging his own, outsider opinion over those of the community.

This phenomenon has been reported elsewhere. In a comparative study exploring governance structures in both a Cree Band controlled school in Saskatchewan, Canada, and a state school serving a Navajo community in northern Arizona, USA, Goddard and Shields (1997) reported that enhanced levels of local community awareness and participation did not appear to have a concomitant effect on the daily life of the schools. Indeed, what happened in the buildings was "associated more with the priorities of site-based educators than with the local control of governance structures" (p. 40). Thus, even increased community participation in school governance did not change the underlying locus of power within the school. They concluded that school staffs, notwithstanding the desires of the community, appeared to maintain a degree of separation from the community, a position usually justified by claims of professional knowledge. Goddard and Shields also noted that the extent to which such professional knowledge should override or usurp the culturally bounded understandings of the community remains problematic. A similar situation was found in the two schools reported on here.

It is in schools serving homogeneous but minority culture populations that the Hallinger and Leithwood (1996) model becomes problematic. That the wider societal culture impacts upon the

institutional structure and culture of the school, and on the processes within, is not contested. However, there appears to be an assumption that the values, mores and beliefs which under-gird the policies and actions of the wider society are shared not only by the principal who must implement such policies, but also by the community to whom they are administered. In northern schools this is patently not the case. There are significant linguistic, cultural, and world-view differences between the dominant society and the minority society of the community. As a result, the role of the principal tends to be one of mediator and interpreter, attempting to explain not only the policies imposed from outside but also the reactions of those within. In this the role of the "imported" principal is made more difficult as she or he is perceived to share the same values and beliefs of the external agencies which are developing the policy statements, and which are perhaps in contradiction to local thoughts. Conversely, the role of the "local" principal is made more difficult as one group expects him or her to reflect the community position while the other expects her or him to adhere to systematic perspectives. This conflict between insider and outsider role expectations, and the delicate balances required as a response, is an area under continued investigation in the current and third phase of the research project.

The curriculum and language of instruction

A visible manifestation of conflict between dominant and minority worldviews can be found in a discussion of the curriculum and language of instruction utilized in the school. In both Moose River and Church Point the language of instruction is English and the curriculum is that established in the provincial capital, Edmonton. There is limited recognition of the indigenous languages (Chipewyan, Cree, and Michif) or of the cultural reality that exists in these northern communities. The students are still expected to follow the established curriculum, achieve the mandated number of high school credits, and pass fluency examinations in their second language.

There are many tensions inherent in the teaching of standardized government curricula and the indigenous languages in First Nations communities. In Alberta, for example, the results from government examinations are published and schools are ranked. Both schools included in this study are

among the "top failing schools" in the province (Alberta Education, 1999). This leads to a sort of gallows humour among the staff. As one administrator reported,

> There's this fellow who does this thing for the Alberta Report[4], he lists the worst schools in the province and certainly I got a letter right away from the Band and I had to go right away and have a meeting with them because we were listed as number 5. And joking about it afterwards, I said, I'm sorry that you misunderstood the report. We were five in grade three but we were two in grade six and nine! I couldn't say it at the meeting but I think we went from five to two!

The low scores on academic achievement tests are the result of many factors. Among these, socio-economic status is being increasingly recognized as a major determinant of achievement (Edington & Di Benedetto, 1988; Young, 2000). It follows, therefore, that the school ought to recognize and address aspects of the community environment within which the students live. As Jamieson and Wikeley (2000) have proclaimed, it is not enough "for schools to have simple goals like academic achievement, they have also to attend to the social and sub-cultural" (p. 449) facets of the community. Noting the contextual differences between the predominantly European and North American research reported in the school effectiveness literature and the cultural realities of southern African villages and shanty towns, Harber and Muthukrishna (2000) make an impassioned plea for the need to recognize cultural context. We would support such a call, with the caveat that minority communities within a dominant society also suffer from the tendency to homogenize difference within a single nation state.

A second determinant is English language proficiency. That many indigenous languages are being lost is no longer a matter of debate among scholars (e.g., Battiste, 1998; Blair, 1998; Kirkness, 1998; Saskatchewan Indian Languages Committee, 1991; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000), many of whom argue that schools must play a significant role in the maintenance and protection of aboriginal languages. However, we found that many First Nations parents and educators maintain the belief that the teaching of Cree and Dene, the students' first languages, is something that is primarily the responsibility of the

community, not the school. Although teachers give lip-service to the need to teach first languages, the perceived difficulties in providing trained staff and adequate resources, and in meeting a wide range of curricula needs, limits Aboriginal languages to a subservient position on the school timetable. As a result, there is only a limited focus on issues of language in the school.

Conclusions

In this paper we have presented and discussed the different perspectives held by constituents with respect to (1) the goals and purposes of schooling and, (2) the curriculum and language of instruction found in the schools. It would perhaps be simple to conclude that the schools reported on here have unclear goals and are functioning as neo-colonial instruments of oppression, and that they maintain a focus on the "settler interests" decried by Hesch (1999). Certainly there is a tendency in both schools to support the status quo and attempt to provide what the southern educational system would describe as a suitable educational experience. The dissonance between this experience and that which might be considered useful and appropriate in a northern community is striking. It is perhaps evident that we would not place ourselves among those whom Griffiths (1998), drawing on the caricature developed by Kate Soper, has called "the growling, flailing, dancing, laser-wielding ludic metaphysicians of anti-racist, feminist, class-based research" (p. 306). Nonetheless, we do hold a "guarded optimism that it is worth struggling for justice, knowledge and understanding" (p. 305) in our schools.

Our work to date would support earlier research findings (e.g., Cummins, 1986; Goddard & Shields, 1997) that the educational organization and daily practice of Canadian First Nation schools reflects an Anglo-conformity orientation in the domains of pedagogy, cultural/linguistic incorporation, community participation, and assessment. If schools are to serve the legitimate needs of their communities, then efforts must be made to review and shape not only the institutional structure and culture of the school but also the culture of the community within which the school functions. It is incumbent upon the school principals to take a lead role in this effort, for as Day et al. (2001) remind us, an effective

[4] A provincial magazine.

principal is one who remains "highly responsive to the demands and challenges within and beyond their own school context" (p. 35). In removing the planks from the palisade, the community has shown how principals in northern schools must reconceptualize their schools as being integral parts of the communities they serve. In their efforts to achieve these goals, principals must attend not only to the voices of the professional and educational elite but also to the voices of those who are generally marginalized, dispossessed, and ignored.

This paper has begun to address the relationships of power, voice, and social interactions, and how they are supported by educational leadership within ethnoculturally diverse northern communities. The investigation reported here is unique in that it presents a collective case study of educational practice, policy, and organization in two schools, both serving ethnoculturally diverse but predominantly First Nations communities in northern Alberta. The interpretations, however, should also prove informative to both practitioners and policy-makers intent on improving student learning in regions with characteristics similar to those of Canada's north.

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